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ABSTRACT

The use of historical fiction in schools in the United Kingdom can help develop language skills and encourage a curiosity about the past. Major historical events contain drama and tension, and an imaginative story about an historical event captures children's emotions and intrigue. Historical fiction is a literary genre where opportunities exist to introduce children to well constructed, descriptive writing. This exposure to descriptive writing extends a child's range of descriptive language. An example portrays how historical fiction can be used effectively in and outside of the classroom with cooperation among the author, publisher, school, and an educational officer at an historical site. Good historical fiction based on solid research, backed by heritage organizations, and used by imaginative teachers is of real value in increasing children's awareness of their country's past. (CK)

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History Through Stories

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HISTORY THROUGH STORIES

First, let me introduce myself. My name is Rosemary Hayes and I come from Cambridge in England. I am a writer of children's fiction. I write for quite young children as well as for the 9-12 age group. I have also worked for a large educational publisher and now have my own - very small - publishing house.

But I am not here to talk about my work as a writer or my work as a publisher. I am here as a passionate advocate of the use of historical fiction in schools. And I hope to show you that this genre can help develop language skills as well as sowing the first seeds of genuine curiosity about the past.

Some of the books which made the deepest impression on me as a child were historical stories. I remember to this day the amazement I felt when I read about the harshness of daily life in a book about the English Civil War. A particular description lived with me for years. A description of a child blowing his nose, quite unselfconsciously, without a handkerchief! Being somewhat fastidious, I found this much more shocking than the descriptions of battles, to which I couldn't really relate.

I also remember a story about an 18th century woman. What particularly intrigued me was the fact that she only washed her hair once a year and covered up her lice-ridden scalp with fancy wigs. Her teeth were rotten and her breath foul, but she was still considered a great beauty with her white powdered face, her beauty spot, her jewels and her fine dresses. Very shortly after reading this, I visited a museum and saw <u>exactly</u> the sort of dress, wig and shoes she would have worn and I remember thinking how uncomfortable she must have been.

It is the ordinary everyday differences in the past which stick in a child's mind and these can be woven into a story about a particular event. Major historical events are, by their nature, full of drama and tension. Therefore children's emotions can easily be captured through an imaginative story about an historical event. As in all storytelling, it is important that children should identify with the characters in the story and one of the best ways of doing this is through descriptions of simple everyday activities. The young reader will become caught up in the story and intrigued by the descriptions of ordinary things and, through this, will absorb some valuable historical knowledge, often without realising they have done so.

Until quite recently in the UK there has been considerable resistance to using historical fiction in the classroom. The purists argue, with some justification, that it is wrong to place contemporary values on something that happened long beyond living memory. How can you describe a child who lived 300 years ago? You, as a 20th century person, cannot possibly

hope to get inside the mind of 17th century child. Everything was so different - social attitudes, education, living conditions - everything was completely outside the experience of anyone living today.

And, of course, they are right. I am acutely aware of this. Probably, most writers of historical fiction get it wrong in a great number of areas. I read, quite recently, a piece written about conditions in England during World War Two. It was written by a young journalist who had done her research very thoroughly, but, because she had grown up in a very different world, she had, to a large extent, failed to understand the prevailing relationships between social groups and between adults and children. In other words, she had attached her own values to a generation which did not share them. And because I remember what life was <u>really</u> like a few years after the war, I could recognise this failing.

And, of course, language changes imperceptibly from year to year. It is never still. It would probably be very difficult indeed for us, today, to understand the language of people who lived in England in the 17th century. So, it would be impossible to try and re-create the authentic speech of the time, but it would be equally false to use contemporary slang or 'buzz-words'. So historical fiction is a literary genre where there is a real opportunity to introduce children to well constructed, descriptive writing. You can also use the correct words for actual historical items while making these items easily identifiable because of their context in the story.

Well written historical fiction can certainly extend a child's range of descriptive language.

No advocate of the use of historical fiction in schools would pretend that these stories are more than a springboard to further study of history. But I maintain that historical fiction is probably one of <u>the</u> most effective ways of awakening an interest in the subject. Of course, story can be used effectively across the curriculum, but in history you have ready-made dramatic events just waiting to be woven into an imaginative story.

This is not to say that historical fiction for children need not be properly researched. It is absolutely essential to research the subject as thoroughly as possible before starting to write a story around an historical event. If a story is properly researched, it can be of real value to the teacher who can then extend it by visits to relevant museums or sites. The historical fiction with which I have been involved has always been read by experts before publication. And in Cambridge, as you can imagine, there are plenty of experts available!

There have been many rewarding aspects of being involved with the re-introduction of historical fiction in schools in the UK.

But one of the most rewarding is the interest shown by slower learners. So much so, that I am now involved with a series of historical stories written specifically for children with reading difficulties. I am delighted to say that these books are being greeted with great enthusiasm by the children for whom they are intended. It is not easy to make stories exciting and 'non babyish' while keeping the text very simple. Of course, the same applies when teaching children whose first language is not English. And, indeed, these particular books are also being used in this area.

I should like to describe an example of how historical fiction can be used really effectively in and beyond the classroom when there is co-operation between author, publisher, school and an Educational Officer at an historical site.

I wrote this book five years ago. It is called FLIGHT OF THE MALLARD and is primarily about the draining of the fenlands to the north of Cambridge. There have always been folk stories and myths about the fenlands. Because, in the past, they were so harsh and inaccessible, the fens often gave refuge to criminals. There were plenty of places to hide from the law and no-one tried to find you amongst the swirling mists, the treacherous bogs and the closely packed reeds. The fens also hid many smugglers, who came down the network of hidden creeks from the coast. Altogether a wild, lonely and harsh terrain.

This land is now some of the richest farming land in Britain, but in the 17th century it was a virtual swamp relieved by a few humpy islands. The fendwellers lived a harsh life. They walked on stilts between islands, they ate eels, they were plagued by ill-health brought on by mosquitoes in summer and damp and cold in the winter. They were a race apart. They were known as yellow-bellies and web-foots and by many other derisory terms. When King Charles appointed a Dutch engineer to drain the fens in the 17th century, the fendwellers recognised that their way of life would be changed for ever and they resisted the draining with sabotage and murder. This story is about a fen family on the one side and a Dutch family on the other.

Just to set the scene, I will read you a short extract from the beginning of the book ....

Obviously, since this was a local story, I was able to do quite a lot to promote the book's use in local schools. I remember once going to talk to a group of elementary school children and being bowled over by what I saw in the school hall. Every wall was covered by pictures showing incidents from THE FLIGHT OF THE MALLARD. There were poems based on the story and then I was shown a folder full of what the children had written after a visit to one of the huge ditches which had been dug by the 17th century developers.

Later, the book was taken up by the National Trust, who run a small centre in the fens. The centre is in the middle of some untouched fenland. The fens exactly as they must have been before they were drained. It is an eerie and wild place. A haven for wildfowl but quite bleak and mysterious. It is easy to understand why the fendwellers had so many superstitions.

Now, every school which visits this National Trust centre is asked to read THE FLIGHT OF THE MALLARD. Then, when they visit the centre (normally in the Summer) they are taken on a tour by the Educational Officer. She is an imaginative woman and at every turn, she finds some incident from the book. 'This is where Meg hid the coracle', 'This is where Peter found Old George', 'This is where the Dutch boy nearly drowned.' Etc. The children are encouraged to break open a pod of the reed mace and extract the downy fluff 'This is what they used to stuff their pillows'. They are shown chunks of bog oak, fossilised from trees which covered the fenlands thousands of years ago, before the fens became swamps. 'You remember, in the book, when the men had so many problems digging those ditches? Well, this is what they kept hitting.' The children can go and dig up some peat and see what it is like when it is dried out. 'This is what Meg and Peter and their father used when they rebuilt their house.'

One of the many activities inspired by the book and the fenland visit was a puppet show put on by pupils at an Elementary School at a United States Air Force base. Interestingly enough, these American children, having read FLIGHT OF THE MALLARD, decided to make their own intepretation of events. Their show was called THE COURAGEOUS DUTCHMAN and showed the other side of the story!

To me, this is the perfect extended use of historical fiction. I am delighted to say that several other historical stories with which I have been involved are also being used in this way. But this was the first.

Good historical fiction based on solid research, backed by heritage organisations and used by imaginative teachers can be of real value in increasing children's awareness of their country's past. This, I am sure, is as true in America as it is in Great Britain and I recommend it as a very enjoyable and rewarding way of extending one aspect of language activity in the classroom.